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ATG Interview: Fred Gullette (part 2)

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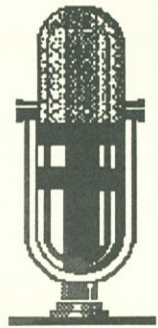
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Against the Grain Interview

Fred Gullette

Reflections on Richard Abel and Company
Part Two

by *Dora Biblarz* (Arizona State University)



Editor's Note: Part One of this interview was published in v.3#1, February, 1991.

The enthusiasm for a bit of nostalgia extends into the academic library-bookseller relations, as we saw at the 1990 Charleston Conference. There is a deeper significance to some of these reminiscences, though, as we try to learn something from past experience in the hope of avoiding the same pitfalls in the future.

Herewith is the perspective - oral history, if you will - of one of the "original" Abel-ites, in what we hope to be the first of a series exclusively for *Against the Grain*.

ATG: *It seems that having the branch managers [of Richard Abel and Company] in charge of the selection meant that the person had to be quite knowledgeable about the book trade as well. So you were able to use this along with the demands of the library with some measure of judgment.*

GULLETTE: Yes. That characterizes the old days very well. I can even remember a ratio that Dick had come up with that a single branch manager could handle out of his head six or seven full blown approval plans. I had to agree with him that was about all I could drag off the top of my skull without having to go to a crib sheet. The economic reality was that here was all this money coming in from the Kennedy Administration and states were also riding high and giving lots of

money to institutions. Suddenly there got to be far more than just six or seven approval plans per office. So now what was going to be done? Dick had anticipated this, it wasn't as if it hadn't been foreseen. Of course what it finally came down to was "well, we'll put together a thesaurus and some non-subject descriptors. And we'll describe the books when we order them out of the publisher's catalog. Then when the books arrive from the publisher out of the bindery, as they're first published, a profiler will sit down with the book and see to it that all descriptions are accurate. He'll expand upon them. He will make changes where necessary."

Then I think at the height of that operation Dick had about 12 people doing profiling. Now, they were working from publisher's catalogs as well as working from the natural finished copy of the book. They were also, I think, responsible for interpreting the drummer's remarks about what the library wanted, inputting all of that stuff.

The thesaurus started with him, and I believe Blackwell is still using it. It was designed by Dick one hot month, July or August; he sat in his basement in a very nice house he had, which was not very far from Reed College, and spent the summer creating that thesaurus. Now it's obvious that he relied heavily upon LC, and Dewey, UDC and probably Rider and God only knows what else. But he put together what is still the profile almost in its final form all by himself. Or at least if he had anybody helping him, he never admitted it to me.

That was used as the basis for the approval plan. And it had advantages and disadvantages. It would put all computer books together rather than LC, which has some under TK for

electrical aspects and some under QA for the programming aspects and some in the Zs for the desktop publishing, that kind of thing. Dick's thesaurus didn't allow for that kind of ambiguity. But there were other kinds of ambiguity that it did allow to creep in.

So that's what these profilers were doing as they were fitting books and fitting library wishes into these profiles and then letting the machine know specifications. It was a very big operation. I can say that the conformity to the library wishes was not as good in those days as it had been when we branch managers were doing five or six things by hand. But it's also perfectly clear that we would not have been able to keep up the kind of volume that was now being demanded.

Publishers had seen the writing on the wall and they were grinding out a lot more books, each one of them. Libraries were spending more money. They were clamoring for more books. So some kind of an automated arrangement was obviously necessary. The Abel's system I think—well, I don't know, I haven't had any experience with any others—it was probably as good as anything that's being done now.

ATG: *How you explain the phenomenon that so many of the representatives and wholesalers today track back their beginnings to a start with Dick Abel?*

GULLETTE: Dick was clearly a charismatic character. He was very effective at stimulating people, inspiring people. I hesitate to use that term, but, yeah, it was evangelism. Dick was forever talking about the importance of books, the importance of libraries, and more than anything else the importance of Richard Abel and Company. One of his standard lines was when I

would come to him and say, "Dick, let's promote this big series, 'Kickholt' or 'Chemical Technology.' It's a lot of money." His response was "No. We'll give the libraries the wrong idea. We'll give them the idea that they should be buying that book from us. We should be spending our efforts convincing them that they should buy every book from us."

So you don't want to distract their attention from what is the ultimate goal of virtue, scrupulosity, hygiene and uprightness and that is to buy every book you bought from Abel Company. And that was a very consistent line. He succeeded in selling a lot of us on that. He was an inspirational guy.

He also picked very good people. There came a time in the history of Abel Company when the sales manager at Prentice Hall forbade any of his salesmen to set foot inside an Abel office to sell books. He said, "We'll do it by mail. I'll take care of it." Because he had lost so many salesmen to Abel Company. There's still one dearly beloved John Laraway who was one

of the guys that finally made Dwight Meyers say, "No more traveling to Abel Company facilities for our salesmen. We'll make it a house account." You can imagine how distressed any publisher would be to lose someone like John Laraway.

Dick was very good at recognizing people that—I don't know if they were people who were particularly good or if they were people that were particularly amiable to being molded by him, but certainly his people have continued to make a very large impact in the world of academic publishing and book selling.

ATG: There are certainly many differences in the field now than when you started out with Richard Abel and Company Inc. We talked about automation as one of the main things that has come to change the nature of the work that goes on there. Do you think wholesale operations work as they did before or is there a tendency to consolidate?

GULLETTE: I guess the major

changes that I've seen are the trend away from branch offices. Abel was the branchiest of all of the jobbers with something like 13 facilities in the world at the maximum point as far flung as Brazil and Switzerland. That obviously is not being done anymore. Don't I remember that Baker and Taylor used to have one office more than they have now?

It seems to be that when these big jobbers do have independent offices, they are independent offices with a special mission that is to carry the slow moving books or that kind of thing. I guess the other impression that I have of change is the way in which orders are handled now. They come in the door. Somebody slits them open and the orders are spilled on the desk of someone who is hired at a low rate and is expected to be an accurate transcriber. And that's all. Not to know a book from a bar of soap. And again is it the intensity of somebody who doesn't have any devotion — it's usually somebody who has very little experience in the book trade — picks the book off the shelf if it's there and if

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it's not there, goes on to the next book. The human interventions with those orders now it seems to me are—I'm biased because I only have seen one jobber in the automation days. The points at which a bookman could intervene have been very sharply reduced or—I think a bookman could still intervene in a lot of places. But the bottom line doesn't justify it.

ATG: You are one of the originals that started with Dick and continued all the way through. You saw it all happen. How do you characterize the success and then the following failure? What would you say were the key elements of each?

GULLETTE: The success was obviously Dick's almost pathological devotion to detail and to getting the job done. Dick was a great stickler for not leaving a little stack of orders on your desk un-mailed at the end of the day and seemed to have an uncanny ability to walk by your desk and pick up a piece of paper and say, "What's this?" And you realized that's the only piece of work that you didn't get done from last week. And somehow he's lighted upon it. He was very, very high on customer service. Quality control we call it nowadays. That stood him in good stead and besides he was a great idea man. He could see his way into such services as the approval plan. He also saw his way into such services like copy flow, copies of out of print books in competition with Xerox. They were bad ideas and fortunately didn't continue for too long.

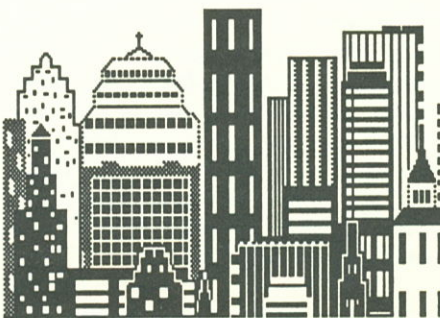
The failure or good part of it, was automation. It made quality control very, very difficult to impose.

ATG: Was that because people took so much for granted or because the automation was at such an early level of development that it couldn't perform economically?

GULLETTE: I think that it was largely a question of there being no way to justify the amount of man time that would have been required to have done quality checking on what the computer was doing. I see the deterioration, the down turn, in the quality of the approval plan as a kind of microcosm of lots of the services at Abel.

One of the major causes of both the success and the downfall was Dick's own personality. He was too persuasive. I remember the report of his financial manager to whom the president of the US National Bank had confessed—mind you, the president of the US National Bank had loaned Dick \$9 million-\$10 million, he was the major creditor—and he confided to Keith that Dick intimidated him. And Dick was very capable of doing that kind of thing.

It was the cause of his downfall in another way. It was not easy, in fact it very infrequently happened that his subalterns would say to him, "Dick,



that's a bad idea." It was very hard to beard that lion in its den. Because the first reaction was his glasses would slide down his nose. And he'd fix you with this stare over the top of his glasses and not even say anything maybe, but just look at you as if trying to fathom if you had a dagger behind those words and if he turned his back would you slide it into him. He was a very, very hard guy to criticize. He had some extremely capable people working for him that needed to be listened to and were very rarely asked their opinion and far more rarely volunteered any contrary opinion.

Ralph Shofner at one time said, "It embarrasses Dick to make a profit." That was another of his serious problems and has to be a major factor in the collapse. He would just live right up to the very edge of what the capital would allow. If he had, God forbid, an excess of money, he'd lay in more inventory or he'd open a new branch office. I thought it a very accurate observation that it embarrassed Dick to make a profit. Maybe it didn't embarrass him, but he certainly did not focus upon it.

For example, he started this Russian approval plan which is a thing that from the outset is almost inconceivable to think of since they could never over print any books. You had to get your order in for the number of books you wanted. That's the number of books you took, and you returned none of them.

Here you were dealing on one hand with these people who insisted upon that kind of thing, on the other hand you were dealing with librarians who all of a sudden say, "Whoops, we're building a new hospital. The administration's thinking of reducing our budget. Stop my Russian approval plan." There were the branches in foreign countries for buying and for selling books that could never hope to turn a profit.

At one time Dick decided it was too time consuming to do inventory by pulling a book off the shelf and looking at the price, having somebody note down the discount he had gotten on it, and then calculate all this stuff. So he'd have a very thorough inventory done and then he worked up a formula and said, "Every book is equal to \$5.75. Now we're just going to go through and count the books." For many, many fiscal years, I'm sure at least three years, but it may have lasted as many as five or seven fiscal years, it went like this: You wanted an annual report. Good. You sent somebody out there and gave him three or four hours. He counted the number of books on the inventory shelves, multiplied it by today's factor. The factor was kept up to date by the financial people looking at what we paid for a book this year. And it was always inflated; always going up and up and up. But in point of fact, the value of those books was on the average going down because with every passing year the book that hadn't sold is now a year older, is now a year closer to being a fossil because the research has been proven absurd or invalid. So the overall value of the inventory was going down, but the book count, that is the financial book count, value was going up.

One of the terrible things that happened with the foreign books was the time that Dick decided he needed an inventory of British books in the U.S.

continued on page 30

ATG Interview
continued from page 18

So he started buying British books and bringing them in. Some of them went out on approval and some of them went out on a firm order, but a great many of them didn't do either of those things. They just waited on the shelf. Then, Dick opened an office in London. After it had been open a while, buying these books that he had been buying direct from the US, he packed up and sent off all the domestic inventory to London because that was where all the branch offices were sending their orders for the Brit books. It was centralizing things, it would be more sensible.

Then, I've forgotten what happened in the Brit office. Maybe the rents got too high or something. The books were packed up and sent back again. Now when they arrived back, they came into inventory at the average annual cost of books. So now these books that were worth less — you would have been lucky to have gotten a dollar a book for them, and they had originally left the U.S. to go over to the London office at, say \$5 a book. Now they were back in the U.S., but now they were all of a sudden worth \$7.50. Because the

average cost of books had gone up. This was one of the shenanigans that the bank let him get away with, his financial manager let him get away with; all of us shareholders and directors let him get away with it. If somebody had called to question, said, "Listen, Dick you can't do that." I was the largest shareholder after Dick. It would have been perfectly appropriate for me to have said to him. "Dick, I want you to send whoever was the CPA away, and get somebody else in here. And I want you to bring them in here and they're going to count the books to derive us a genuine value." Do you think I was going to do that? No. It was enough to just walk in the den of the lion without getting kicked in the teeth.

ATG: If there was one thing that would make a difference, what do you think it would be? That is, if you could take Dick aside and say 'now listen to me' What would you say?

GULLETTE: I don't know. There were so many things. I guess I would have to take him aside and say, "Don't be a pioneer in every field." And that's what he was attempting to do. He liter-

ally did speak about and pronounce such words relative to Blackwell or to Baker and Taylor about bringing them to their knees.

If you really pinned him down, I'm sure you would get Dick to admit that his ideal for the Abel Company was that every book to be sold in the universe would pass through his hands in some way. Dick wanted to be able to say to someone, "You need a book from Outer Mongolia? We've got an office there. If you come through us, we'll get it for you." The fact that it might have cost a quarter of a million dollars to maintain an office in Outer Mongolia in order to lose an additional \$2 or \$3 selling this book at some absurd price, if Dick would have been able to afford it, he would have done that kind of a thing. He wanted to have an absolutely complete service. Therefore, he did out of print and other projects. I guess if I could say anything, that would be "Dick, focus on the U.S. market and don't do anything outside the U.S." It would have saved him a lot of money.

ATG: That's all folks. Such is history. Hindsight is twenty-twenty. ☘

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